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Resistance to Hegemonic Forces: A Study of Ngugi WA Thiongo's The Trial of Dedan Kimathi

Ngugi Wa Thiongo is widely regarded and recognized as a humanist deeply interested in the growth and well being of his people and country. He became influenced by the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, developing an ardent opposition to colonialism, Christianity, and Non-African influences in Kenya.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is based on the solid facts of African history but imaginatively reconstructed by the playwright. It was written in response to 1974 play by Kenneth Watene, which characterized Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau uprising, as a crazed and brutal paranoiac. But the content of the play derives from the actual trial of Kimathi after his betrayal and capture in 1956, but Ngugi makes extensive use of mime, dance, and Gikuyu song to portray Kimathi as a courageous freedom fighter struggling against the forces of imperialism. Ngugi has collected material from different sources such as from Handerson's The Hunt of Dedan Kimathi, Karari Njama's Mau Mau from Within and Huxley's A Thing to Love. This solid historical material has been filtered through their imagination and presented in a concentrated form. As it has been stated in the Preface:

We agreed that the most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. The play is not a reproduction of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement. (Preface, by Thiong'o Mugo)

Ngugi has tried to explore the conflict between the British rulers and the patriotic Kenyans represented by Shaw Henderson, Waitina, Johnnie, guards and soldiers on the one hand and Kimathi and his native followers on the other. As the play opens with the scene of Kimathi's trial in the imperial court so it is necessary for the reader to know the background of Kimathi's organization of his resistance movement. Kimathi's organization of common people and workers known as forest fighters are inspired by a patriotic zeal. They wish to subvert the imperial rule by causing all kinds of inconvenience to the British administration in Kenya. Their patriotic zeal is amply evident in the song of Kimathi sung by the forest fighters:

When our Kimathi ascended
Into the mountain alone
He asked for strength and courage
To defeat the white man

He said that we should tread
The paths that he had trodden
That we should follow his steps
And drink from his cup of courage

If you drink from this cup of courage
The cup that I have drunk for myself
It is a cup of pain and sorrow
A cup of tears and death and freedom

(Thiong'o, Mugo 63)

Critics have consistently acknowledged Ngugi as an important voice in African letters. He has been called the voice of Kenyan people by certain commentators, while others have lauded his plays and novels as among the most underrated and highest quality to come from Africa. Critics have also praised Ngugi's role as an influential postcolonial African writer, particularly in his portrayal of corrupt post-liberation African government. As Ngugi himself asserts: "Every writer is a writer in politics", and that "there is nothing like political neutrality in literature" (Thiong'o Writing in Politics, 3-4) as his play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has been noted for its overtly political agenda, its attempt to give a literary voice to the poor of Kenya, and its consistent critique of colonialization and oppressive regimes. Further the dramatic conflict in this play is drawn along ideological line, pitting against the ruled, or exploiters against the exploited. Since the play is marked by a high political content, its author can be said to be, indeed, writer in politics. And in his politics he sides with the exploited people, to whom he delivers some subtle political lessons as well as giving them a sense of direction with regard to the transformation of their world through their own efforts.

Ngugi shows his own political and patriotic zeal while showing Kimathi's struggle fighting against the foreign rulers and Kimathi's own countrymen who act as traitors by collaborating with the Whitemen. When the British soldiers reply that they are the Queen's soldiers, Kimathi grows terribly angry:

This kind of imperialism's vermin
Makes my blood boil with hate,
Did you come all this way?
Many thousands of miles
Across the sea, over the air
A long way from your home,
To kill our people
So that Lord So-and-so
Might drink others people's blood in peace?

(Thiong'o, Mugo 64)

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is an imaginative reconstruction of the heroic role played by the legendary Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya. Through mime and flashback it equally shows the historic contribution of Kenyan peasants and workers when they rose up against the British colonial rulers to regain their lost lands and achieve political independence.

The play reveals a colonial society in which, on the one hand, there are the colonialists like Shaw Henderson and the other Whites together with their African and Indian surrogates and collaborators in whose hands rests economic and political power; and, on the other, the African peasants and workers, the exploited, from whose ranks emerge the freedom fighters led by Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi.

Here we have two conflicting ideologies: reactionary colonialism versus radical nationalism. The one is capitalistic and exploitative; the other nationalistic and radical. As Dedan Kimathi reveals through his language and actions, his radical nationalism begins to assume a Marxist coloration; his speech becomes marked by such Marxist rhetoric such as words and phrases like ‘Workers and Peasants’, ‘The oppressed of the land’, ‘labour power’, ‘our oppressors’, ‘organization’, ‘imperialism’, ‘revolutionary struggle’, ‘organization’, ‘imperialism’, ‘revolutionary struggle’, ‘against all forces of imperialism’, ‘Kenyan masses shall be free’, etc.

Although political struggle with the British rulers is foregrounded in the play, it also presupposes the economic and cultural aspects. Ngugi also explores the theme of the economic and political exploitation of Kenyans. Colonialism being largely a system of economic and political exploitation as there are Shaw Henderson and other settlers who, together with their African quislings, fight to keep colonialism in place and intact. But on the other hand there has been shown exemplary heroism and the relentless struggle of the Kenyans for political freedom.

The didactic nature of the play testifies to the author’s commitment to the cause of the exploited Kenyans. As Ngugi himself asserts: “We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which without masking mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for the liberation” (Ngugi, Mugo, Preface). Central to the meaning of the play are the four trials Dedan Kimathi is put on. They contain much of the didactic material directed at the African (Kenyan) audience. In all the four trials the imperialistic perspective and the nationalistic perspective are defined more and more clearly. In the first trial Shaw Henderson, the judge tries to bring round Kimathi by his diplomatic arguments. He tells Kimathi “I’m a friend”, “Look, I come peacefully. I’m not armed” (32). But Kimathi is not ready for any compromise. He retorts, “Shaw Henderson!

Friend and killer of Africans, ugh... you cannot deceive me even in your many disguises. Just as you came in I had seen you in my dreams. All the slaves you have deceived in the past Raider of slaves!" (Thiong'o, Mugo 32). Kimathi does not accept the imperialist law at all. When Shaw Henderson asks him to plead guilty so that he may live, Kimathi opposes it. "What do you mean live? British Imperialist arrogance! Who are you to grant or deny life? ... Deals! Pacts! Treaties! How many nations have you wiped out, and later said: Well, according to this treaty and that treaty, they had ceded their land and the lives" (33). Now Kimathi sounds cocky, confident, provocative, defiant and intrepid. He identifies himself with the people's cause for which he dies without yielding to the imperialist:

Kimathi: In the court of Imperialism!

There has never and will never be

Justice for the people

Under imperialism

Justice is created

Through a revolutionary struggle

Against all the forces of imperialism.

Our struggle must therefore continue.

.....

But our people will never surrender

Internal and external foes

Will be demolished

And Kenya shall be free!

(Ngugi, Mugo 82-83)

The judge is, of course, embarrassed by Kimathi's patriotic and poetic answers. But he tries to hide his real feelings and tells him curtly, "You see, I am not a poet and a dreamer

like you. You must plead in court tomorrow. And you must plead guilty (33). Kimathi plays on words and says, “Plead guilty? Guilty pleading” (33). Kimathi can easily see through their ‘deals’ and ‘tricks’. He wants to put an end to the colonial game of hunting and exploitation. “When the hunted has truly learnt to hunt the hunter, then the hunting game will be no more” (34). Kimathi wants to fight for the freedom of his own country and not for aliens.

Further, when Shaw Henderson asks Kimathi to plead guilty and save his life, Kimathi rebuffs strongly: “Life. My life. Give up my life for your life. Who are you, imperialist cannibal, to guarantee my life? My life is our people” (35). Kimathi does not accept Shaw Henderson as his saviour. He tells him, “Save your life. A colonialist my saviour?/Saved into neo-slavery” (36). Kimathi remembers the happy days of precolonial Kenya. The Kenyans used to sing and dance with the joy of life, but “Then the colonialist came/And the people danced/A different dance” (37). Colonialism brought slavery to the native Kenyans. Kimathi wants to restore the pre-colonial freedom of his countrymen.

Thus Dedan Kimathi is the supporter of the collective will of resistance of the Kenyan people who have suffered deeply under the oppressive rule of the British government. Ngugi, as Kimathi is the mouthpiece of the playwright himself, demonstrates Kimathi’s patriotism and his arrangement of military groups as Kimathi has been trying to unify the Kenyan peasants and workers against British imperialism. Kimathi expresses his patriotic philosophy when he reminds them that they must learn a lesson from their past victories and defeats and that they must know their glorious history and the heroic deeds of Kenyans who resisted the invasion of their country by foreigners. Thus The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is the portrayal of Ngugi’s commitment to the resistance to hegemonic forces.

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